



## Emotional responses to world inequality



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### ABSTRACT

Drawing on discussions with Kenyan, Mexican and British teachers, this paper reports on emotional responses to international socio-economic inequality. Emotional regimes are explored to identify what ‘appropriate’ responses to inequality are in a variety of local and national contexts. These include rural and urban settings, and social milieus ranging from elite to deprived. Politeness, hand-wringing and humour can create a protective distance; while sadness, anger and hope for change connect with the issue of inequality and challenge the associated injustices. Distancing and connecting emerge as central themes in the analysis. The spatial patterns of emotions align with participants’ socio-economic positions, in more disadvantaged settings unapologetic anger about inequality was expressed, as was humour in the face of group or national misfortune. These emotional regimes can be understood within the wider context of participants’ socio-economic position; their senses of injustice; and their views on the possibility of social change. I argue that social norms surrounding justice and distribution can influence levels of inequality, and vice versa. This is of particular importance given the societal damage caused by inequality, which is now widely acknowledged.

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## 1. Introduction

Emotions are central to how people are positioned in relation to a topic or situation. Being emotionally engaged may amplify attitudes and provide an impetus for action. In contrast, denial of something being morally problematic may mean not feeling disturbed (Cohen, 2000). Connecting to or distancing from an issue is a key theme in this analysis of secondary school teachers’ and trainee teachers’ attitudes towards socio-economic inequality. Emotions are important for understanding the interconnected yet unequal social world, to the extent that neglecting the vocabulary of emotions “leaves a gaping void in how to both know, and intervene in, the world.” (Anderson and Smith, 2001, p.7).

Emotions are active elements of public debate on world issues. Emotions, such as fear of terrorism, may be provoked to justify political manoeuvres (Pain, 2009). Negative emotions surrounding inequality may be roused by unmet expectations. These expectations are based on experience of norms of remuneration, capacity to meet basic needs, and level of disposable income, amongst other

factors (Hegtvedt et al., 2008). I am interested here in understanding how local socio-economic positioning and norms influence emotional responses to inequality. In particular, I consider the emotional regimes surrounding inequality in three countries that differ markedly in terms of national wealth.

It is widely argued that current levels of world inequality, normally taken to imply income or wealth inequality, are unacceptable (Amin, 2006; Dorling, 2010; Ghosh, 2008; Roy, 1999; Sutcliffe, 2005). Economic inequality is closely associated with health, social and educational inequality. It has been argued that greater economic equality would enable a fuller use of human resources, create larger markets for goods, and reduce costs of managing society, such as policing costs (Sutcliffe, 2005; Wacquant, 2010). Many negative outcomes of national inequality in richer countries have been identified, which impact upon the wealthy as well as poorer groups (e.g., Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). Being richer than others can even lead to feelings of vulnerability and depression. This may be partly due to searching for fulfillment in objects of social status (James, 2007). Thomas Pogge takes a Rawlsian approach to poverty, arguing that we have a responsibility not to cause harm (Pogge, 2008a). Bob Sutcliffe, on the other hand, emphasizes that redistribution is desirable for social justice independent of consequences (Sutcliffe, 2005). These authors provide some responses to

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inequality embedded in academic debate, a debate that provokes emotional and moral statements in addition to discussion about evidence and theory.

This paper presents comparative research on attitudes to world socio-economic inequality. It focuses on how secondary school teachers and trainee teachers from Kenya, Mexico and the UK talk about such inequality. I emphasize the emotional stances imbued in discussions about inequality, and pay attention to how participants position themselves in relation to inequality. The three countries were selected to span a wide range of levels of international inequality, whilst having broadly comparable national inequality (the UK is the more equal society of the three, reflecting a trend of richer countries being more equal than poorer countries; Barford, 2010). The research locations also capture diversity in terms of the countries' roles in the world economy, geographical location, and regional influences. Exploring how emotional regimes are interrelated with the local, national and international socio-economic positions of research participants offers insight into spatial patterns of emotions surrounding inequality. Characterising the emotional regimes concerning world inequality is important for understanding how people create connections and distances across social and physical divides.

## 2. Literature on politics, emotions and interconnectivity

Since the mid-1990s, there has been increased interest in emotions within the disciplines of sociology, psychology, philosophy, and geography (Reddy, 2005; Thien, 2005). More recent interest in emotions within the social sciences stems from the recognition of their political importance. The idea that emotions are regarded as separate from the public sphere and essentially private has been widely critiqued across feminist (or emotional) geography literature, since they are tied up with power relations. For example, social hierarchies are associated with psychosocial stress and status anxieties (Anderson and Smith, 2001; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; Routledge, 2012). Social constructionists view emotions as “culturally relevant, public performances, reflecting power relations and mediating between subjective experiences and social practices” (Zembylas, 2007, p.58). Understandings of politics, policies, experiences and attitudes can be improved by considering their emotional dimensions. Emotions can motivate people to act against injustices (Routledge, 2012).

In recognition of the active role of emotions, William Reddy coined the term *emotives*, a word similar to *performative*, to express how emotions influence the world (Reddy, 2005). He describes how emotional information is conveyed in responses to others in words and facial expressions. Reddy argues that communities establish norms resulting in an ‘emotional regime’, where conformity to preferred emotions is endowed with authority. Social interactionist Arlie Hochschild (Hochschild, 2008) uses a similar concept of ‘feelings rules’. For Hochschild, emotions are based on cultural ‘prototypes’. Particular reactions are expected in response to certain events: one *should* be thrilled to win a prize, one *should* be furious when mistreated. As cultures are fluid and interconnected, feeling rules can be interpreted as having local, national, and international influences. These expectations vary between cultures and contexts due to local differences in general standards (Hegtvedt et al., 2008). A constellation of feeling rules contributes to emotional regimes, and both terms are employed in this paper.

Attitudes to world inequality are likely to be influenced by spatial variations in emotional regimes and feeling rules. Emotional regimes, which make some responses acceptable and others distasteful or inappropriate, are partly influenced by material conditions. This is because material conditions underlie the procurement of essential goods and luxuries (and social norms of

wealth influence what is deemed essential or luxurious). Economic position also influences the cultural norms and values to which people are exposed. Thus, geographies of inequality could bear some similarities to the spatial patterns of emotional responses to inequality.

Reddy's and Hochschild's views of the social conditioning of emotions counter the common impression that emotions are involuntary (Anderson and Smith, 2001), and several researchers have documented how emotional expression is consciously controlled. For instance, protesters may avoid angry and violent responses to social injustices so as not to provide an excuse for others to delegitimize their objections (Routledge, 2012). Similarly, in Mexico and the USA, media accusations of being ‘crazy’ or ‘emotionally craven’ have undermined and silenced protest against injustices to women (Wright, 2008). In both cases, dominant groups have encouraged emotional control in an effort to maintain social control. Yet channeling rather than suppressing anger and aggression has enabled protests to persist, whilst conforming to wider emotional expectations (Thrift, 2004). However, a strong response is sometimes necessary to initiate social change. Roland Barthes distinguishes between *punctum*, as an emotionally charged response that ruptures complacency, and the more common *studium*, which is a general, polite interest in something (Barthes, 2000). Emotion demonstrates engagement, whereas polite interest suggests an emotional distance. Those carefully managing their emotional responses in order to maintain legitimacy, whilst acting upon strongly held views, negotiate conflicting demands.

Norms for emotional performance have been identified as governing emotional labour. This ‘surface acting’ requires people to display emotions that they do not feel (Moore, 2008). For example, retail workers are expected to be cheerful and friendly, whereas judges should be emotionally neutral (Kiely and Sevastos, 2008). Emotional labour at work strains employees (e.g. Nylander et al., 2011) due to dissonance between actual and performed feelings. Some people resolve this dissonance by aligning their own feelings with expected behavior referred to as ‘deep acting’ (Moore, 2008). There is less need for such emotional labour for people of higher status. Generally, people who are powerful and of high status have more positive emotional experiences than people with lower status (Collins, 1990 in Moore, 2008).

My interest in the socio-economic context of emotions resonates with a feminist approach that binds everyday emotions to networks of power and privilege within which they are located (Pain, 2009). Economic and other social inequalities are widely understood to be instances of injustice, and so have the potential to cause anger and frustration amongst those experiencing these injustices. Other researchers have demonstrated that those suffering disadvantages experience more distress and anger, and those whose advantages are associated with injustices are more likely to experience feelings of guilt (Hegtvedt et al., 2008). The type and extent of emotional response may reflect how much someone is influenced by an experience or observation, as well as by dominant feeling rules.

Distancing is of particular interest given that people and places are now generally understood to be relational and connected to others, which affects their identities and capabilities. The uneven development of places is partly due to their interconnectedness: “The ‘gap’ between the ‘first’ world and the ‘third’ is not just a gap; it is also a connection.” (Massey and Jess, 1995, p.225). Through time, humans have empathised with increasingly large groups, from families to the nation state and beyond (Rifkin, 2010). At a smaller scale, a South African Xhosa proverb ‘*umuntu gumuntu ngabantu*’ (a person is a person through persons) acknowledges the importance of society to individuals' identities (Raghuram et al., 2009; Shutte, 1993 in Smith, 2000; Therborn, 2009). Given these

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